

The Library and the Campus Visit: Communicating Value to Prospective Students and Parents

Gone are the days where librarians can afford to assume everyone knows the value of the academic library. In fact, “communicating value” is among the top trends in academic librarianship, as evidenced by the work of the Value of Academic Libraries (VAL) Initiative and the accompanying VAL Report.¹ There is an urgent call for librarians to assess, record and share our impact on student learning and our contributions to institutional strategic goals. In order to secure our place in this increasingly tenuous climate, librarians must understand and communicate the impact we can have on student success and retention but also what we can add to the recruitment and enrollment of prospective students.

Successful enrollment on college campuses is more vital than ever as state budgets and endowments dwindle. Universities are relying more and more on tuition dollars and are boosting their commitment to strategic enrollment and admission. One of the biggest factors impacting where a student decides to go to college is their visit to campus. Financial considerations are a huge factor, especially to the parents footing the bill, but a student’s feeling of belonging at the college and the quality of facilities matter tremendously.²

A student’s decision to enroll may be slightly influenced by facilities like the library or the academic feeling they represent, but at many institutions, the library gets a fleeting mention at prospective student events. As far as the campus tour, it may include a quick stop into the library lobby, and a few mentions about numbers of books and a few services. Is that enough?

As librarians in the academy, we must articulate and promote the role of the library in a student's college career, even before a student enrolls. We need to re-center ourselves as the "heart of the university" and demonstrate the value and impact that we can have to administrators, faculty, and student affairs and admission staff. We can play a part in enrollment and recruitment by promoting our academic contributions to prospective families and being better engaged in the campus visit.

The campus visit makeover

The campus visit, and particularly the student-led tour of campus, has been getting a makeover in the past few years. The "golden walk", as it has long been called, is a great influencer in whether students apply or decide to enroll to a certain college. Because enrollment is important than ever, administrators are taking a second look at this ritual. Many colleges are hiring outside consultants to redesign the campus tour from a drab, boring fact-filled campus history lesson to a personalized, engaging story-centered event that showcases the real "feel" of the school. The new and improved tour highlights what makes that college different from its competition and uses student stories, signature experiences (such as a photo with a legendary spot on campus) and even souvenirs.³

Jeff Kalley, of the higher education consultancy firm Target X, follows along on university campus visit experiences and gives suggestions from everything from parking, signage, and facilities to core messages and branding. He advises full-time admission staff and student tour guides about how to turn statistics and facts into impactful messages. For example, a 15:1 student to teacher ratio becomes an anecdote about the student tour guide texting his professor or going out for coffee together. These authentic,

personal stories are much more powerful than facts and numbers, Kalley argues, and it's this authenticity and connection that make students more likely to enroll.⁴

With this renewed interest in the campus visit, it's a great opportunity to make sure the academic library or libraries are highlighted on the campus tour. This is also the time to educate enrollment managers, admission staff and student tour guides about the libraries on your campus and to communicate their value.

The campus visit at Miami University

The year 2009 was an interesting one for Miami University, and for many other public universities facing financial cuts and budget woes. Amid celebrations of Miami's Bicentennial there were concerns over missing the target yield for first-year students entering that fall and the financial repercussions that come with it. Because of these concerns, the university administration began to identify ways to attract prospective students and get them to attend the university in the fall. This included engaging consultants like Target X, examining financial aid strategies and re-positioning the university's brand.

Because of the focus and importance on attracting and retaining a great student body, the entire campus became more involved in this effort. In addition to a new director of admission being hired, faculty members were making phone calls to prospective families, current students were engaging would-be students online through social media and many campus offices were lending a hand to help with recruitment and enrollment activities.

One of the first steps in increasing collaboration with the admission office was an email to the director of admission about meeting with library staff. Myself and two other librarians involved with outreach activities met with the director and other admission staff about what the Libraries could do to help with recruitment efforts. We asked where we

could be best-used and of course highlighted facilities and services of interest to first-year students.

From this meeting, we set up opportunities for direct email correspondence from librarians to admitted students, created a website specifically for prospective students about library services on the admission website, arranged for librarians' guest blogging on the admission site and increased involvement with upcoming admission events.

The office of admission was very receptive to deepening the connection with the Libraries at this time because of all the focus on recruiting and retaining students. Admission was getting a lot of pressure from university administrators regarding the student yield and I think they appreciated any help that was offered. We were able to jump in with existing initiatives and lend a hand while also reminding the staff of our importance to the university's main mission of educating students.

This same year my position with the University Libraries transitioned from mainly communications and public relations duties to First-Year Experience Librarian. Prior to this time, our coordinator of library outreach initiatives gave twice yearly updates to student tour guides about changes in hours, services and facilities. With the retooling of my position to focus on first-year experience, the Libraries were able to strengthen the relationship with admission and campus tours.

Jeff Kalley of Target X came to Miami University in the fall of 2009 for a campus audit and makeover of the campus visit and tour. I made sure I was very involved with his visit and provided a voice for the Libraries. The Dean of Libraries wanted to ensure that with all the changes happening with the campus tour that at least one campus library was included. I served as an ambassador for the Libraries and made sure to check in with Admission staff often about the changes to the tour. Luckily the main library remained as a part of the campus visit. After the Target X audit, we were given a short list of cosmetic changes to make within the library and I was given the opportunity

to help re-write the student tour guide script and met with them in person. The tour was changed to provide more student anecdotes and stories, so I tried to provide some ideas for students and made corrections when needed.

Because of my close involvement with the campus visit and recruitment efforts over the past few years, I have learned a lot about how to best reach out to the student tour guides and keep information as up to date as possible while still letting the tours remain authentic and student-led.

My recommendations

1. **Get on the campus tour!** If your library is not currently on the campus tour, fight your way on to it. If you are not a part of the “golden walk”, you may be left out of the conversation completely. Share assessment data, letters of support from administrators and faculty and anecdotes from students with whoever makes this decision. The *US News and World Report* article mentioned above⁵ is great fodder as well.
2. **Facilities matter.** Just as quality facilities can help a student choose your college, bad ones can turn them away. Know the path that student tour guides take through your library. Make sure what prospective families see is clean, pleasing to the eye and with clear signage. This may be a good time to replace some carpet or get better lighting along their path as well.
3. **Give good information.** Prospective student events, unlike orientation or accepted student programming, don't always have information fairs where a representative from the library can answer questions. You must educate the full-time admission or enrollment management staff people because you want them to give decent answers to questions. I have met with several individuals in those

offices, given them recent copies of our annual report and information packets with assessment data.

4. **Connect with the student tour guides** and get to know the tour guide advisor. I also asked for the tour guide script, and updated it with the newest and most important information about the impact we can make. If your campus is as big on storytelling as mine is, give the students ideas of stories they can use. You may find that their anecdotes about literally camping out at the library or the fact that they only come in during their tour guide shift less than appealing. Supply your student tour guide with good stories if they don't have them!
5. **Give constant updates.** I attend student tour guide staff meetings once a semester to give them big updates and changes to hours. It's a chance to praise them for what they are doing right and make corrections. Also, if I hear something incorrect or unflattering about the libraries, I immediately email the tour guide advisor.
6. **Be available.** On high volume tour days or for special events, offer drop-in open house sessions at the library or have a librarian liaison on hand to answer questions. We have had pretty good luck with putting up an informational display about the libraries that also advertises tours if they ask at the desk. We have a librarian on call during the day that is able to give a quick library tour if needed.
7. **Alert library staff.** Our circulation and information desk staff has the pleasure of hearing multiple tours a day. The staff knows to contact me with problems and corrections, often with the time and description of the tour guide. They can also be prepared to answer questions or make corrections on the spot.
8. **Share real stories** about the library. If you do have a chance to talk one-on-one to students, tell stories about how the library has impacted other students and

how the library makes things easier. I like to give the students the inside scoop on the best places to study and how the library culturally fits in on campus.

9. **Embrace the helicopter parent.** Use today's highly involved parents to your advantage. Let them know how the library, and librarians, can help their student. Share how academic libraries have changed and the qualifications and specialties of librarians. Parents of upcoming first-year students love to hear about expectations of students, so I always share information literacy standards and what professors expect from first-year research papers.

To sum it up, we must convey that libraries and librarians are here to help and that we are part an integral part of the academic process. We must not only assess our impact on student learning and retention but also share our value with everyone from potential students and parents to provosts. As libraries, we can impact enrollment and do our part to contribute to the campus-wide mission of recruiting and matriculating a great student body. While we do our duty to communicate our value we can also add value by being involved and active with the growing concern about student enrollment.

Notes

¹ Megan Oakleaf, *The Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2010).

² John H. Pryor and others, *The American freshman: National norms fall 2011*, (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, 2011).<http://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/TFS/Norms/Monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2011.pdf>.

³ Eric Hoover, "'Golden Walk' gets a makeover from an auditor of campus visits," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 6, 2009. Accessed June 12, 2012. <http://chronicle.com/article/Golden-Walk-Gets-a/21806>.

⁴ Hoover.

⁵ Greer.